History of a Hospital and it's Founders

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HISTORY OF A HOSPITAL AND IT'S FOUNDERS

. . . "as flowers are to the forest, so to the world are children."

Mills

"A Little Bit of Heaven"
re-visited

The British Hospital for Mothers & Babies, Woolwich, S.E.18

"A threefold cord is not quickly broken"

MISS ALICE GREGORY

THE "BRITISH HOSPITAL"

MRS. LELIA PARNELL

MISS MAUD CASHMORE

THE HOME FOR . . . MOTHERS & BABIES

in Wood Street, Woolwich, was founded in 1905 by three friends; Mrs. Lelia Parnell, the first Matron, Miss Alice Gregory, the honorary secretary, and Miss Maud Cashmore, the second Matron. The friendship between these three, so constant and so fruitful, was uninterrupted until Mrs. Parnell's death in 1931. Its strength is symbolised by the words on her memorial in the present hospital chapel: 'A threefold cord is not quickly broken.' The recent retirement of the other two after 40 years' continuous work in Woolwich is a fitting moment to record something of their achievement; and, since human memory is short, to recall that the Home owed its inception, and the hospital its development, to certain ideals which inspired the minds and sustained the labours of these three remarkable women.

In 1891 Mrs. Parnell became a pupil at the British Lying-in-Hospital in Endell Street, London. This was 11 years before the passing of the Midwives' Act, when the only distinction between a trained Midwife and a handy woman was the diploma granted by the London Obstetrical Society. From Endell Street Mrs. Parnell went on to the New Hospital, later known as the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital. Here the training was of a high quality, and she claimed its standards governed her work throughout the rest of her career. After a stay of two years she was chosen by the former Matron, Miss Bagster, for the post of Matron at a small cottage hospital of 11 beds at Paulton, in Somersetshire. In view of the number of miners received there suffering from the effects of pit accidents Mrs. Parnell went to gain further experience at the Royal Free Hospital before taking up her post. She showed thus early not

only a great aptitude in the profession she had chosen, but an appreciation of the value of long and extensive training.

Shortly afterwards she was joined by her friend, Miss Gregory, who had persuaded her parents to let her go to Paulton on three months' trial as a probationer. This extended to 2 years, during which time the number of damaged and dying women admitted to the hospital, and those whom she was sent out to nurse in their homes deeply impressed her with the dangers and disasters of childbirth in a country district. Something better than the services of untrained handy women seemed a burning necessity to Miss Gregory, and she soon decided that she must be spared as a nurse in the hospital to fill the more urgent need of a trained midwife working in the neighbourhood. With the full concurrence of Mrs. Parnell she entered Dr. Annie McCall's maternity hospital at Clapham in the autumn of 1895.

This was a training school for medical students, midwives and maternity nurses, the course for a pupil-midwife lasting 3 months and costing 20 guineas, and a further guinea a week for board and lodging. As a matter of practical economy all types of students wore their oldest clothes, just as in those days surgeons relegated their outworn frock-coats to service in operating theatres. No apron or overall was worn at a confinement, and Miss Gregory was considered fastidious, and became not a little unpopular, for having dresses of a washable material. Listerian principles had so far spread that she recalls some of the students had bought a fish-kettle in which to boil the obstetric instruments, but she thinks the custom lapsed from being too laborious. There was no tuition in the feeding

MRS. PARNELL & MISS GREGORY WITH QUEEN MARY
AT THE OPENING OF THE PRESENT BUILDING

or management of infants, and no text-books written for midwives, who had to grope as best they could among those written for medical students. Yet it is clear Dr. McCall's kindness and concern for the patients made a deep impression on her pupil.

The doctor must have been an exceedingly light sleeper, for every nurse returning at night from a district case was inevitably overheard entering the hospital and promptly summoned to her bedroom to give an account of the confinement and a report on the patient. The interview usually closed with a sharp reproof for the time the pupil had taken to set out in

answer to the summons for her services. For this reason many of the students habitually slept half clothed. Miss Gregory stayed at Clapham 4 months, a month longer than the recognised period, and witnessed or assisted at 80 deliveries.

Back at Paulton she found Mrs. Parnell had already engaged her to attend 6 women, and in her first year's practice from the hospital she delivered 72 women, in the second 88. Her services, so quickly appreciated by the mothers were not looked upon with the same favour by the handy women or the local practitioners, although certain of each gave her their support. But the controversy over the claims of doctors and midwives to attendance on women in childbirth was to be waged with deplorable bitterness for many years. Miss Gregory has never doubted the greater suitability of the trained midwife to conduct normal deliveries. Happily the advances in the prevention and treatment of abnormalities have largely solved the difficulty on rational lines. At that time the loss of life and injury to health, involving both mothers and infants, was so widespread that an increase in the number of trained midwives offered the best hope of improvement. Mrs. Parnell and Miss Gregory were so convinced of its necessity that they determined to found a training school themselves.

Meanwhile in 1900 Miss Cashmore had joined the Paulton hospital as a probationer. The opposition she had to face in leaving her home was not unusual. But it is strange to realise she might well have been discouraged from training at all almost at the outset of her career, for she was judged to be unsuited to become a nurse by a very influential member of the profession she had chosen. Fortunately this error of judgement

was not shared at Paulton where Miss Cashmore understudied Miss Gregory and was trained by her as a midwife. With the exception of one period of serious illness she has worked as a midwife for 45 years.

The decision made, Miss Gregory undertook to arouse the interest of people who might help and the even more difficult task of raising money. The number of letters she wrote, the meetings she organised, and the journeys up and down the country she made would have daunted anyone of less determination; for she had the pioneer's experience of finding indifference and opposition are more common than encouragement.

By degrees her enthusiasm won her enough support to make a start possible, though when the Home in Wood Street was opened in 1905 the faith upon which it was founded was far sounder than its finance. That faith never wavered. The house with its accommodation for 8 patients has given place to a large modern hospital in Samuel Street standing in its own grounds. With its war-time annexe in the country it has 70 beds, with plans ultimately to house 100 patients at Woolwich. It may be added that Woolwich was chosen at the outset because it showed less opposition than many other places to which Miss Gregory took her proposal. Though the Home amalgamated with another hospital and acquired a new title it is, as often as not, still referred to as "the Wood Street Home," signifying the esteem that still exists in people's hearts for that house of humble beginnings. Mrs. Parnell directed the work inside the Home with Miss Cashmore as her assistant. As in Somersetshire, Miss Gregory took charge of the midwifery in the district. Being new to Woolwich and its neighbourhood many of the patients innocently accepted for confinement were

The British Hospital for

discovered to live many miles away from the hospital, yet Miss Gregory from the beginning was also responsible for all the secretarial work and the continual effort needed to get funds. It was done in her room in such moments of the day or night as she was not needed elsewhere. Perhaps the greatest cause for satisfaction was that within a few weeks of opening, the first pupil, Miss Ruddock, applied to take the longer training of which she had heard. She has since worked as a midwife in many parts of the world and returned to give most valuable service to the hospital in the last war, attending women in their homes during the worst of the bombing.

It was soon clear that the work would outgrow the Wood Street premises, and the vigilant secretary was shrewd enough to see the possibilities of the site on which the present hospital now stands. As a piece of derelict looking waste ground it was bought in 1912 at something of a bargain price. Wood Street had to do duty for several more years but two events hastened the change on which the hearts of its workers were set. The Committee of the British Lying-in Hospital were at this time faced with a most difficult problem. Many of the small surrounding streets, whose inhabi-

tants it had served for 150 years, were due to be demolished to give place to the new thoroughfare of Kingsway and Aldwych. Miss Gregory was introduced to the Committee at one of their discussions on the hospital's future and greatly impressed them with her advocacy of the better training of midwives and the supervision of the expectant mother—then something of an innovation. Miss Gregory has said it was one of the most thrilling moments of her life when the Committee decided to amalgamate with the house in Wood Street, and to build a new hospital. The Holborn Borough Council was however very loath to lose the hospital's service, and it was only the strong support given to the Committee's proposal by King Edward's Hospital Fund for London which finally induced the Charity Commissioners to sanction the amalgamation in 1915 under the combined title of The British Hospital for Mothers and Babies. The assets contributed by the British Lying-in Hospital were substantial and enabled a start to be made with the new building.

The day before the foundation stone was to be laid Miss Gregory made one of her many journeys to the Ministry of Health to ask for financial help. This

time her hope of a grant was fulfilled. She left the Ministry with a promise of £20,000 towards the building and immediately telephoned the news to her two colleagues at Woolwich. A few minutes later passers by were puzzled to see Miss Cashmore hoisting the Union Jack on the hospital flagstaff. The grant was later increased to £30,000 with an injunction to Miss Gregory that she must not again seek further funds from that source. She gave her word, and, though often sorely tempted, has kept it. The foundation stone was well and truly laid by Princess Christian, and in 1922 the new hospital was declared open by H.M. Queen Mary. It provided 40 beds and accommodation for part of the staff, but the Wood Street house had to be kept on until 1929 when the administration block was completed. Seven years later ten more beds in a self-contained unit were added to meet the ever increasing demands.

This career of unbroken progress was interrupted on September 14th, 1940, when a bomb fell on a corner of the ward block. The whole of the lying-in wards were put out of action, half being a total ruin. There were 60 patients in the building, 56 babies, and the whole of the nursing staff, distributed in such safety as was afforded by the basement and passages. All escaped injury, and a baby born as the bomb exploded visited the hospital recently, a healthy boy five years old.

The patients were immediately evacuated and by night only two remained in the building; some were sent to their homes, others went by ambulance to a hospital at Farnborough with our nurses to tend them. Within a week 36 beds were re-opened in the out-

patients' hall, the lecture room and the nurses' sitting-room here in Woolwich, the Ministry of Health providing another 40 beds in a house equipped as a hospital in Buckinghamshire. After staying there 5 months accommodation was found nearer home at Moatlands, Paddock Wood, and the Hospital has recently acquired this property as it has become clear that much time must elapse before re-building and extension can be begun at Woolwich. By March 1944 there had arisen on the ruins of the ward block a reconstructed temporary wing providing 14 of the lost beds, and it was opened by our President, H.R.H. the Princess Royal.

That, then, is the story as the last of the founders of the original Home left it, but the story of its building is only one part. Within its walls between 1905 and 1944, 20,830 in-patients were delivered, and its midwives have attended 6,716 in their homes. During the 6 years of war 6,263 passed through the wards, a far higher annual average than at any time in its history.

Not less impressive has been the fulfilment of its founders' original object. In 1905 the Home for Mothers and Babies instituted a course of training lasting 6 months for nurses who had already taken their general training and a year for all others. The Midwives' Act of 1902 had sanctioned a period of three months for both classes as long enough, and it must often have occurred to Miss Gregory that when talking to Dr. McCall of her intention to require pupils to train for a year, she was warned that so many broke down at Clapham during the 3 months it was most unlikely any could withstand a year. Nevertheless it was not long before there was a waiting list on the books at Wood Street. In 1926, or 21 years after its opening, the Government

adopted Miss Gregory's standard, and made the longer training compulsory; and again in 1938 required all who are not state registered nurses to train for two years before taking the examination which qualifies them to practice. On this Miss Gregory decided there was no longer need of the Committee formed of her original friends and supporters known as "The Council for the Promotion of the Higher Training of Midwives," and its long and useful career came to an end.

HITLER PASSED THIS WAY

Midwives trained at Woolwich have long been working the world over, and many pupils from other countries have come to receive their training here. Before the war a long series of women from Holland passed through the hospital for their maternity nurses training; already more are applying and will be specially welcome after all their country has suffered. One of our Sisters was released to join the Army Nursing Service on the outbreak of war, and when her ship docked at Lagos she found the hospital was well known there. A resident to whom she talked of work at home spoke of a native nurse who, after training at Woolwich, had returned and opened a Maternity Hospital for her own people.

Thus far we have referred mainly to two of the three founders. The third is no less a remarkable personality. No pupil has passed through the hospital but has carried away an indelible impression of Miss Cashmore's unremitting concern and watchfulness for the patients' safety, her incomparable skill as a midwife, her calm in emergency, her patience and her sympathy with suffering. In her practice of obstetrics she has combined a wise conservatism with a readiness to accept and apply all the good that recent knowledge has brought to light.

The first Matron chose for the Hospital's motto "Esto sol testis" and it has been the guiding principle of her successor. Her gifts as a teacher are no less outstanding. She has combined the power to enforce a strict discipline on her staff with a great understanding of human nature. The dignity which is the wholly unconscious expression of the goodness of her character never conflicts with a sense of humour of the gayest and most endearing kind

Throughout the war those who lived with her in the hospital wondered if she ever slept, for within a few moments of every raid warning she was to be seen calmly touring the building, visiting the patients, directing their removal to shelters, guiding and helping her staff to minister to them. If a woman was in labour while a raid was in progress, and it happened countless times, our Matron was there standing by, giving by her tranquillity more courage and confidence to patient and nurse than can ever be assessed. No wonder her fame is almost legendary.

For a short time during the war some of the patients were moved to a house lent us in Kent, and the monks from a nearby monastery helped the nurses to move in the heavy equipment. One of the most energetic helpers told the Sister in charge that he had been born in the Wood Street Home, and that his mother had bade him always remember that he undoubtedly owed his life to a certain Miss Cashmore. Was there by chance anyone, he asked, in the Hospital who recalled her ; He would like to learn more about her. The Sister contrived that they should meet, to his astonishment and delight.

At the time of Miss Gregory and Miss Cashmore's retirement great changes in the hospital services of our country are due to be announced. It is said that the day of the voluntary hospital is past, and it is possible that the history of the foundation of the British Hospital for Mothers and Babies may come to be looked upon as an historical curiosity. Yet those who have had the experience of working at Woolwich may be excused if they are apprehensive lest, in the plan of things to come, the spirit of service which has gained for British nursing its international renown may not receive due

recognition. Should it be so, hospitals, and perhaps maternity hospitals in particular, will suffer an irreparable loss.

Facing the entrance door of the Hospital is a chapel of singular beauty, and its central position in the building signifies the guiding spirit which throughout has deeply influenced the founders in their work. In the pupils' lecture room there hangs a message of encouragement to Miss Gregory from Florence Nightingale written in 1906. The three friends who are the subject of this brief sketch possessed in no small measure the qualities of that great pioneer; her clearness of vision, her tenacity of purpose, and, when they deemed it needful, her courage to withstand officialdom and fight interference. Their aim, like hers, was to serve their fellow creatures and bring them safety and comfort. They saw the point at which reform must begin and pursued their object until it was achieved. Their place in the great tradition of nursing is secure. To the two who remain, a host of friends and admirers wish health and peace in their retirement at Sanctuary, Alfriston, under the Sussex Downs where they have been joined by Sister Card who for 20 years was in charge of the district midwifery.

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VIEW OF OUR AUXILIARY HOSPITAL
AT MOATLANDS, KENT

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